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Carol X Weakley 08/16/2006 04:04:56 PM From DB/Inbox: Carol X Weakley

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Text:

C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 03199

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DISSEMINATION: POL
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: CDA:GCRETZ
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 003199

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/10/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [ECIN](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: SHIMON PERES ON THE HOSTILITIES IN THE NORTH AND
THE WAY FORWARD

Classified By: Charge Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. During an August 10 meeting Vice Premier Shimon Peres told visiting U.S. Representatives Johnson, Miller, Royce, Shaw, and Sherwood, and Ambassador Jones that Hizballah's goal is to destroy Israel. Peres defended the Israeli Air Force (IAF) saying it is only targeting rocket launchers and bases of Hizballah operations in the bombing campaign. He contended that Israel had been unwilling to use force against Hizballah rockets, even though it knew they existed, until the July 12 attack. He laid out three objectives for Israel's future: establishing peace, building defenses and focusing on economic development. Peres asserted that Hizballah capabilities are based on the strength of the militant's convictions, not the sheer numbers of fighters they have to wage war. He took issue with the way that the media is portraying Israeli action as "disproportional." Finally, Peres underlined Israel's appreciation for U.S. support and assistance during the current conflict. End summary.

We knew about the rockets

12. (C) Responding to a question from an NBC reporter at the opening of the meeting, Peres refused to comment on his decision to abstain from the August 9 Israeli Security Cabinet vote to expand ground operations in Lebanon. Peres told the delegation that even though Israel had been aware that Hizballah had missiles before the July 12 kidnapping of two soldiers, Israel did not launch an offensive attack against Hizballah, responding to defend itself only after the attack. Peres reaffirmed the Israeli government's appreciation for U.S. support, and said "I can assure you that Israel will never ask for American soldiers to come to our borders to fight for us." Peres suggested that the

timing of the July 12 attack, just one day after the EU's Solana arrived in Tehran to discuss Iran's nuclear weapons program, strongly suggests Iran is using Hizballah to divert attention from its WMD programs.

Hizballah's Objectives

13. (C) Peres told the delegation that Hizballah and its sponsors have three main objectives in this war: the destruction of Israel, the "enchantment of Lebanon by the spell of Sh'ia Islam and Iran," and the destabilization of Iraq. Peres described the war as first and foremost a religious war being waged in an attempt to destroy Israel. He said that since Hizballah will not be able to achieve this objective it is also seeking to bring Lebanon under "the spell of Sh'ia Islam and under the spell of Iran." Finally, there is the possibility that the conflict will encourage Sh'ia militants throughout the Middle East and create conflict in Iraq.

GOI Objectives

14. (C) Peres said that the IAF is focusing on two types of targets: rocket launchers and locations harboring Hizballah fighters or operations centers. Peres emphasized that Israel was attacked in a religiously motivated war by the "Quartet of Evil" (Hizballah, Hamas, Syria and Iran) and is acting in self-defense.

15. (C) Israel's long-term goals, as described by Peres, are establishing peace, ensuring national defense, and building economic peace. Peres described the disengagement plan as the first time that Israel's right-wing politicians agreed with the left on the creation of a Palestinian state. Peres claimed that prior to the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit from Kerem Shalom on the Gaza border, the GOI was considering releasing Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails at the request of President Abbas. Peres underlined that the main strategic victories from the conflict with Hizballah will be political, not military. Alluding to the current conflict, Peres said that the goal for the Israeli military is defense and highlighted that IDF stands for Israeli Defense Forces. Finally, Peres called for building bridges through economic peace with initiatives like the development of the Jordan Valley into an industrial zone and joint projects aimed at Dead Sea conservation.

Lebanese Capabilities

16. (C) Responding to a question from the delegation, Peres assessed the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are "as strong as they want to be." Citing the fact that the LAF has 60,000 soldiers, while Hizballah numbers only around 6,000 militants, Peres said Hizballah's dedication makes it a stronger military force. Peres said there are 2,500 Hizballah militants in southern Lebanon who are "hardened fighters," but Israel has killed 400 of them in the last month. He estimated that a further 400 hard-core militants were injured in the fighting, bringing the total Hizballah core force down to around 1,600. When asked about the officer core of the Lebanese army, Peres said that he believes the top echelon of commanders reflects the confessional diversity of Lebanon.

International Media Response

17. (C) Sharply criticizing the response of some international media outlets that have called the Israeli response "disproportional," Peres questioned whether sending more than 200 missiles per day towards civilian populations for more

than a month is "proportional." The delegation asked Peres to remember that this is a media war as much as a ground war, and that explaining as many of the facts on the ground as possible will remind the world that Israel is responding to an unprovoked attack on its northern border.

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18. (C) Peres postulated that it will be interesting to see whether Russia chooses to use this opportunity to show that it is a "great country" by holding up progress at the UNSC. He also said that Siniora's seven-point plan gained a majority of support at the recent ministerial meeting in Beirut only because of the three-way split in the Islamic world between Iran, fundamentalist Sunnis, and moderate Islamic states. Peres again thanked the delegation for continued U.S. support.

19. (U) The Codels did not have an opportunity to clear this cable before departing.

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